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In the past twenty years or so my family has accumulated an eclectic collection of paintings, prints, masks, books, and albums. Last year we agreed that it was time to make some difficult decisions as to what to keep and what to get rid of: it was time to be more selective. We looked and talked, and made compromises. However, there was one piece, a print bought in Mexico, that I felt ambivalent about. Through the years, it became so commonplace in our house that we hardly noticed it.

The piece in question is a print by Juan Torres, a contemporary artist from the Mexican state of Michoacán. Now in his 60s, Torres has exhibited many individual shows in Mexico and abroad and was deeply influenced by his teacher, a legendary Mexican muralist, Alfredo Zalce (1908-2003). Born in Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, Torres built his artist quarters 30 miles away in the countryside town of Capula. He combines several styles in his art, but one of the stronger elements in his work comes from the *costumbrista* style, a style based on realism that incorporates folkloric elements and draws inspiration from indigenous peoples and their cultures. Artists working in this style focus on depicting scenes from the lives of common people. For Torres, inspiration comes from Michoacán, its history, geography, customs, and rituals.

I met Torres and bought the print during my first summer in Mexico in 2003. I stayed in the city of Guanajuato for three months working on a research project in sociolinguistics. In the middle of my stay, my husband came for a visit, and we embarked on a two-week journey through northwestern and central Mexico.

Travelling by public buses from Guanajuato, we went to Guadalajara, then to Morelia and Patzcuaro, finally reversing direction and going all the way to the northwestern city of Zacatecas. The last leg of the trip to Zacatecas was a ten-hour bus ride, punctuated by frequent stops by the federal police (*los federales*), automatic weapons in full view, searching for illegal emigrants and drug mules going from the southern states to the US border. Our Mexican friends in Guanajuato, an older couple, Anita and Lalo, from whom I was renting a room, had warned us that these stops sometimes evolve into false accusations leading to opportunities to demand *morditas* (bribes), something we were lucky not to experience first-hand.

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One time, we got close: at 3:00 in the morning, a contingent of *federales* hailed our bus to the side of the road. Two police officers boarded the bus and, after looking at everyone's papers, came back to our seats and asked my husband to follow them off of the bus. "We need to search your luggage." Not looking either of us in the face, they muttered the directions to follow them outside. "But I'll have to go with him, too, and he doesn't speak Spanish, and we'll miss our next connection," I stood up from my seat, sweat running down my spine even though the AC was blowing in my face. Suddenly, one of them looked straight at me: "Your accent sounds strange. Where are you from, really?" "Moscow, Russia," I replied, hoping that somehow it would make a difference. "*La gringa rusa*," smirked the cop. "She is too far from home," said the other, shoving my husband's passport into my hands. And that was that; our brush with danger was over. I still don't know what changed their minds: was it the fact that I was Russian or that I wasn't American? Or that they recognized me as both? Or that I wasn't silent? I'll never know, but the memory of being awoken by men in uniforms with huge guns pointed at me in the aisle of a dark bus has lingered to this day.

Is this the feeling that I associate with "Rosas"? Maybe it is part of the story. What comes immediately to mind when I look at "Rosas," though, is the delight that I felt standing at the *zócalo* in Morelia, gazing at its majestic cathedral and the surrounding colonial buildings, constructed in the seventeenth century out of local pink-colored quarry stone. What a gorgeous city! In 1991, Morelia was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site for its well-preserved historical center that has

The Rooftops of Morelia (Author's photo)

retained most of the original sixteenth-century layout with many buildings dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Originally named Valladolid, it is now branded as "the most Spanish town in Mexico" because of its colonial architecture. Ironically, the town's other claim to fame is its role in Mexican War of Independence. In 1828, it was renamed to commemorate Morelia's most famous native son, José María Morelos y Pavón, a revolutionary priest who led the rebels against the Spaniards in 1811 and was executed in 1815.

Our first evening in Morelia, we found a rooftop café and watched how the pink color of the buildings turned golden and orange as the sun was setting, until suddenly we could only see their grey silhouettes. It was a great spot to people watch: from our vantage point, we could see the whole plaza with tourists and locals strolling by and street vendors here and there selling brightly colored helium balloons in all shapes and forms. Who would have thought that we would see balloon characters of SpongeBob SquarePants, Goofy, and Mickey Mouse bounce merrily high above the plaza as the groups of traditionally clothed women busily sell *rebozos* and *dulces* to tourists?

Morelia was also the town where we ran into an antique dealer named Yuri. When I told him that I was originally from Russia, he proudly explained that he was named after Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. He told us about an exhibition of the art of his friend, Juan Torres, in Morelia's modern art museum and suggested that we should visit it. We did, and the following evening we were back at Yuri's shop, asking if we could meet the artist. After a phone call, he gave us directions to Juan Torres' place in the small town of Capula outside Morelia.

About an hour by yet another local bus on a bumpy country road, the town, or rather the village of Capula, was not much to look at: small, unremarkable stucco-covered buildings put together haphazardly formed its center. Capula is famous for its ceramics, and several street vendors were selling their wares in the town center, some unglazed and some decorated in intricate flower or geometric designs, rows and rows of bowls, cups, plates, and vases in makeshift kiosks made out of tarps. What stood out among typical wares were *catrinas de barro* (clay sculptures representing death). Brightly colored and of various sizes, they looked both ominous and fascinating.

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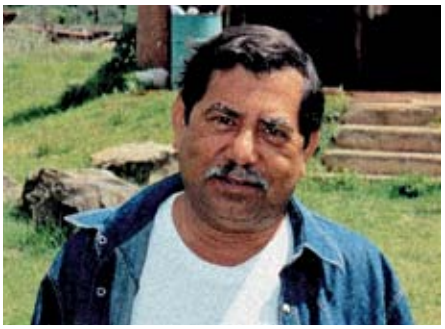
We learned later from Juan Torres that one of the reasons why he had chosen Capula for his residence was its long tradition of making ceramics. In addition to establishing his own studio, he also opened a *taller* or workshop for locals. When in 1982 he created his first *Catrina* ceramic sculpture, his local students learned how to make them, too. Production has never stopped.

The first artist to render a three-dimensional image of *La Catrina*, Torres got his inspiration from famous 1910 etchings by Jose Guadalupe Posada, which Posada created during the Mexican Revolution. Known as *La Cavalera Catrina*, Posada created images of a female skull or skeleton dressed up as an elegant lady in high-society fashion of that time, with her most recognizable feature being a huge, plumed hat. Sometimes, she'd be carrying a parasol; sometimes she'd also have a purse. *La Catrinas* were meant to satirize those who didn't support the revolution and insisted on clutching to European roots and denying their own Mexican identity or *Mexicanidad*. Soon *La Catrina* became so popular that other Mexican artists incorporated her image into their works; for example, she is prominently featured among the 150 portraits that comprise Diego Rivera's mural *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda* (Dream of the Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park) circa 1946. As a cultural icon, La Catrina moved away from its revolution-inspired beginnings and became one of the most recognizable images associated with *El Día de los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead). Today, *catrinas* from Capula are famous all over Mexico and have come to exemplify Mexico's tongue-in-cheek fascination with death.

Although both of us wanted to spend time poking around the markets in Capula, our main goal was to visit Juan Torres. So, off we went in search of his house. It was supposed to be easy to get to from the bus stop, at least according to Yuri—just about half a mile down the road. We got off at what we thought was the right stop, just as Yuri had instructed us (or so we thought), and found ourselves on a dirt road. After a long walk and with the help of several



Juan Torres (Author's photo)

locals who kindly pointed us in the direction of *la casa y taller del Maestro*, we were finally standing in front of a huge gate with Capula's biggest house behind it. Known as *el Panteon* in the neighborhood, the house was surrounded by a beautiful garden with original sculptures by Torres. It also had a chapel that served as the studio and workshop space for the artist and his students.

We buzzed at the gates and were ushered into the compound by a young man named Alejandro who spoke impeccable English. His father, a wealthy businessman from Monterrey, was one of Torres' biggest patrons. That summer, Alex was staying with maestro to participate in a ceramic workshop; in the fall he was to return to Vermont to attend a private school. After a brief tour of the compound, we went to Torres' studio to meet him and look at his art. The studio consisted of three large rooms: a ceramic workshop with shelves around the walls packed with *catrinas* and other ceramic wares, a room full of Torres' paintings, and a room with a printing press. After a brief chat, we went around and Maestro showed us his work and talked about it. The conversation started in English, but soon switched to Spanish. We admired the *catrinas* in the studio: much more elaborate than the ones at Capula's center, most of them were about a foot high, with intricate adornments of feathers, shells, and glittery baubles. Although quite taken with them, I decided not to buy one when we learned that Torres no longer made them; instead, they were constructed by his wife and students. Because I really wanted something that was by Torres himself, we switched to looking at his paintings and prints. The paintings were handsome, but beyond our budget. But the prints were both portable and affordable: a combination we couldn't refuse.

After flipping through many prints, I was drawn to a portrait of a young woman. A silkscreen over laid paper, 18 by 23.5 inches, the print was numbered 4 out of 50, signed and dated "Juan Torres, 2000." Its background was made to look like shabby wallpaper with stenciled bright red roses. In the foreground was an image of a female nude with long, dark, flowing hair and a luscious scarlet mouth. The woman's body had a semi-translucent quality: the texture and design of the wallpaper were still slightly visible through her image, giving her a ghost-like presence. The piece was entitled "Rosas" and was printed in Torres' studio in Capula. I was attracted to its melancholic mood, the otherworldly protagonist, and the juxtaposition of muted tones against the reds of the roses and the girl's mouth.

The more I looked at the image, the more endearing it seemed to me. Soon I realized that it had a Russian connection: the wallpaper as the background for the portrait reminded me of the books that futurist Russian artists and poets produced in the 1910-1920s: these crudely made books on wallpaper were the artists' challenge to the status quo as represented by the bourgeois tradition of fine book-making and printing. Born out of revolt, the wallpaper books became a necessity when shortages engulfed all spheres of life after the Revolution of 1917, and artistic supplies were nowhere to be found.

Far from the world of Russian futurists, Torres said that he chose the wallpaper background because he wanted to explore the ghost-like quality that it added to this image: the embossed texture of the wallpaper seeps through the image, adding the eerie effect and evoking a strong feeling of melancholia and decay that touches everything: youth, beauty, innocence. From our conversation with Torres, we learned that the young woman in the print was the artist's daughter who at the time was mourning the loss of her baby. Torres also said that he had been fascinated with death and that it had been one of the key motifs in his art. In a way, this was also a *catrina*, but instead of a jolly skull lampooning death, this image was about the impermanence—the loss, and the grief we experience in life.

Now, years later, what am I to do with "Rosas"? It is true that some of the objects that we invite into our living spaces have a short shelf life: at first, topics of conversation, they lose their novelty and stay somewhere in the periphery of our vision, kept, but forgotten. I don't want to lie and claim that "Rosas" is my favorite. It isn't, and it won't be, but examining it carefully after looking at it and not seeing it for many years has triggered the memories that were nearly erased: the excitement of my first trip to Mexico, the ill-fortuned bus ride to Zacatecas, the surprises of Morelia and Capula, Juan Torres, *catrinas*. Beautiful and somber, its subject matter inspires melancholia and connects me to my past. Beyond the artist's intention, it has acquired a sentimental value and a life of its own, entangled in mine, and that's why I am keeping it.

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